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☞ “Bienvenid@s a casa”- Return Schemes and the Remigration Process of Ecuadorian Female Migrants**

Abstract: In the 1990s many Ecuadorians migrated to Spain in order to escape the national crisis. Today, these migrants are among those most acutely affected by the global financial crisis. Both the effects of the crisis and the remigration policies of the Spanish and Ecuadorian state have made remigration an attractive option for many migrants. This article analyses the remigration processes of Ecuadorian women and asks to what extent the return schemes address remigration realities.

Keywords: Return migration; Gender; Financial crisis; Ecuador; Spain; 20th-21st Century.

1. Introduction

Migration is the explanation for everything here in Ecuador: it is a consequence of the economic crisis; it is the reason for family disintegration; we benefit from its remittances. It is rather overblown within political discourse because it serves as an explanation for all the problems we have in Ecuador (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008).¹

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¹ Semi-structured interviews were conducted with migration experts (Gioconda Herrera, migration and gender expert of the *Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales* FLACSO Ecuador; Susana López, *Secretaría Nacional del Migrante*, SENAMI; Paola Moreno, *Servicio Jesuita a Refugiados y Migrantes*, SJRM; Katerine Renjifo, International Organisation for Migration, IOM Ecuador) in Ecuador in September 2008 and April 2009. Expert interviews are cited as: Interview Surname Expert, Institution, Date (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008). Biographical in-depths interviews with ten women return migrants were conducted in October and December 2007 in Quito, Ecuador. Interviews with the female return migrants are cited as: fictitious codename, return migrant (Pilar, return migrant).

After the financial, economic and political crisis at the end of the twentieth century, thousands of Ecuadorians left their *patria*, their homeland, and made their way to more prosperous countries. At the beginning of the new millennium, the number of Ecuadorian citizens migrating grew constantly. Most migrated to Spain. Remittances became the second most important contribution to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Ecuador (after petroleum, the main export). Over ten per cent of the 15 million Ecuadorian population live outside the country, in what President Correa calls the ‘fifth Ecuadorian region’.

For a long time, returning to Ecuador was an issue people only talked or dreamt about, and few Ecuadorian migrants actually decided to return. The Ecuadorian and Spanish governments nevertheless agreed on a common policy of return in 2007. Each of them had different reasons for pursuing this policy: Spain’s main aim was to bring about a reduction in the rapidly rising numbers of immigration requests provoked by family reunification of Ecuadorian immigrants; Ecuador hoped to stop human capital outflow and family disintegration, aiming instead at using the migrants’ potential as development agents. Unexpectedly, in 2008, a major change took place: it was the first time in ten years that the number of Ecuadorian emigrants decreased. The global economic recession dramatically reduced the advantages of migration for Ecuadorians. The unemployment rate in Spain, for example, increased to 17.4 per cent in April 2009.² Migrants were hit even harder by the crisis because the sectors in which migrants tend to work (such as construction and social care) have higher unemployment rates than the average. As the situation for Ecuadorians in Spain has worsened, returning to Ecuador has become increasingly attractive. Since the initiation of the Spanish voluntary return programme for unemployed workers (*Plan de Retorno Voluntario*) in June 2009, approximately 6,000 migrants have benefited from the plan.³ According to the Ecuadorian government, another 5,000 families have been supported by the Ecuadorian return plan (*Plan de Retorno Voluntario, Digno y Sostenible*).

This article aims to fill the research gap on the phenomenon of return migration within the Ecuadorian context⁴ and contributes to two broader discussions within contemporary migration studies: first, gender and (re)migration; and second, (re)migration and development.

First, by looking at the gender-specific experience of remigration processes, this paper focuses on the feminisation of (re)migration. While a number of studies have looked at the feminisation of Ecuadorian emigration after 1998⁵, return migration has not yet been analysed from a gender perspective. Despite the growing body of work on gender and migration, migration policies such as the return plans continue to conceptu-

² “El paro supera los cuatro millones de personas por primera vez en la historia”. In: <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/economia/paro/supera/millones/personas/primera/vez/historia/elpepucco/20090424elpepucco_2/Tes> (24.04.2009).

³ ILO (International Labour Organization): “Voluntary Return Programme for non-EU migrant workers in Spain”. In: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=29> (06.08.2009).

⁴ Within the Ecuadorian context, scientific research concentrates on emigration and the experience of migrants in the receiving country. See, for example, Herrera (2005, 2007) for a more general overview of Ecuadorians in Spain and other European countries, López de Lera/Oso Casas (2007) on Latin Americans in Spain, and Paz Guarderas (2007) on Ecuadorians in Barcelona.

⁵ E.g. Camacho/Hernández Basante (2005); Wagner (2004); López (2004); Pedone (2002); Villamar (2002).

alise ‘the migrant’ as a gender-neutral subject. With the following research questions we seek to highlight the importance of integrating a gender perspective within migration studies and policies: how do Ecuadorian women experience their remigration process? What arguments become crucial in their decision-making processes? What are the problems and opportunities which confront the female migrants on their return?

Second, we seek to critically interrogate the migration and development debate through our empirical findings. Governments and development organisations alike highlight the potential of remigration for local development, both in regard to the financial investment of the remittances and the knowledge, skills and experiences acquired. Both return plans, the Spanish and the Ecuadorian one, are based on these assumptions. However, we seek to challenge the determinist relation between remigration and development by asking: What do returnees themselves take from their stay abroad? In their own perception, what kind of knowledge or skills have they acquired and how do they apply them back in Ecuador?

After an introduction to both ‘gender and (re)migration’ and ‘(re)migration and development’, we present an overview of the Ecuadorian and Spanish return plans. In the second section of our paper, on the basis of our empirical research we will discuss the factors influencing the decision to remigrate or to stay, and the difficulties and opportunities female return migrants face in their home country. Finally, we conclude with some observations regarding the gender-specific situation of remigration and general assumptions surrounding (re)migration and development.

2. Feminisation of (re)migration and of our research focus

The term ‘feminisation of migration’ refers to the phenomenon whereby the number of migrant women is globally and continually increasing in such a way that it now nearly equals or in some cases even exceeds that of men (Han 2003). Women’s reasons for emigration cannot be explained simply as a forced response to economic hardship. Rather, emigration needs to be explained by a multitude of economic, social, cultural and emotional factors (e.g. Riaño/Baghdadi 2007). A similar argument can be made for the decision-making process of returning migrants. In many cases emotional, social and cultural reasons play a crucial role in addition to purely economic reasons. In our paper, we want to look both at the decision-making process and the situation female remigrants confront when returning to their home country in regard to: (1) economic challenges, (2) emotional reasons on a personal level, and (3) the re-negotiation of gendered role models and other cultural and social issues.

2.1. *Gender-specific labour market: The economic situation of female migrants in Spain*

The informal sector of private households can be considered the second greatest labour market for migrant women⁶ after the low-wage sector of the formal labour mar-

⁶ Like Helma Lutz (2007), we would like to emphasise in this context that it is quite surprising that the fact of being a woman is generally considered ample proof of one’s ability to provide social services; see also Camacho/Hernández Basante (2005: 124).

ket. Ecuadorian women have benefited from the growing demand for childcare, elder care and housekeeping in Spanish middle-class households. Private households are a preferred working place for migrant women, as the informal atmosphere of the family gives them a feeling of safety. In many cases they are allowed to live with the family and therefore do not need to spend money on housing and food, which enables them to save more money within a shorter time. The flip side of these often illegal jobs is that migrant women are not protected by labour rights or covered by insurance. For these reasons, 'private space' can be simultaneously conceptualised as a 'safe space' for illegal migrants and as an extralegal space where women are unprotected and dependent on their employers.

In Europe as well as in Latin America, women have traditionally been responsible for reproductive work. While migrant women fill the gap of care work that results from the increasing integration of women into the formal labour market in industrialized countries, a 'deficit of care' emerges in their home countries – a process which is described by the term 'global care chain' (Lutz 2007: 32f).

2.2. *Transnational motherhood: Emotional bonds with the home country*

Reproductive work consists of both purely manual household work and the emotional aspects of raising children and maintaining a loving, stable family. Other women relatives in the home country often perform household tasks for the absent migrant women. However, the migrants feel that they are not replaceable as mothers. Motherhood as a 'primary identity' determines the experience of female migrants, as Camacho/Hernández Basante (2005: 124) have revealed. A paradoxical situation is created by the fact that women migrate *for* their children and at the same time suffer *because of* their children when they are absent for a long period of time. In the end, mothers either return *because of* their children or try to bring their children with them to Spain. However, the substantial efforts migrant women make for their children are often not recognised by their children or other family members. A "new form of motherhood" (Chant 2003: 249) – 'transnational motherhood' – emerges when children are left behind in the home country. These strong emotional ties as well as the will to work for a better future for their children need to be considered as compelling factors in women's decision for or against remigration.

2.3. *Reconceptualisation of gender roles: Cultural struggles between home and abroad*

While women's work within the social sector emphasises the traditionally ascribed roles of women, Wagner (2004) argues that the experience of migration leads to a reconceptualisation of traditional gender roles. Their financial independence gives migrant women the possibility to think about a future 'without men' (López 2004: 5; Pedone 2002: 63). Scholars have different opinions on the emancipatory effects of migration: on the one hand, Wagner (2004: 5) states that "whether migration has emancipatory effects cannot be answered easily; the migration experience facilitates the negotiation and (re)construction of other subjectivities, but not for all migrants are these new gender

roles desirable or reachable”. On the other hand, Han (2003: 284) argues that “gender research on female migration has shown that women of southern countries try to avoid or at least postpone returning to their home country”. According to him, they fear the patriarchal structures back home as well as economic problems once they return.

By pinpointing not only the economic but also emotional and cultural arguments for and against remigration, we aim to describe the complex, multi-causal decision-making process in which female migrants engage. After an introduction to the migration and development debate, we start with an overview of the history of migration from Ecuador and the Ecuadorian and Spanish return plans. Economic, emotional and cultural aspects of the return migration phenomena will then serve as structuring elements in the following discussion of those return plans.

3. Migration and Development – Prospects and Limits of Migration Policies

“International migration offers an ideal means of ‘promoting co-development’ of the migrants’ countries of origin, and of the societies that receive them” (speech made by Kofi Annan in 2006 when presenting the report *International Migration and Development*).

One of the important key words in the context of migration policies and studies is co-development, the linkage between migration and development. The new ‘migration and development’ strategy rejects the negative perspective on migration, and emphasises the potential advantages and opportunities of migration processes. While ‘classic’ migration policy attempts to restrict migration flows, the ‘migration and development’ strategy assumes that developing countries can benefit from migration movements. Remittances already contribute significantly to Ecuador’s economy and social welfare, even though the positive impact of these financial flows is highly disputed. Politicians argue that they could be spent in a more ‘productive’ way (instead of mainly in consumption). Brain drain, it is argued, can be converted in ‘brain gain’, when migrants return or cooperate with their home country’s private economy and education system.

Within the ‘migration and development’ debate, social scientists talk about ‘circular migration’ as a way of maximising the development potential of migration (Bieckmann/Muskens 2007; Vertovec 2007). The circular migration concept can be seen as a consequence of the new transnational migration patterns which differ significantly from former permanent migration movements. The central idea of circular migration is that migration flows may result in advantages for all parties (migrants as well as the sending and receiving countries) allowing migrants to come and go with few restrictions. It provides benefits for receiving countries by meeting labour market shortages and for sending countries through remittances, know-how, networks and investment by the migrants; and for the migrant individuals themselves by offering employment and control over the use of their wages as well as reducing the social impact of migration by maintaining closer links to home (Vertovec 2007). However, the positive effects of policies encouraging circular movements only work if there is a full circle, not just half a circle. This means that bi- and multilateral migration policies should ensure that migrants are able to emigrate, return and re-emigrate again.

As we will show, the decision-making process is multi-causal and it seems that personal factors can be more decisive in a return than economic reasons. As these aspects elude the state and take place on a personal level, the significance of state-run return measures may be seen as limited. The governments of both countries should be aware that their incentives can only constitute a framework within which individuals act. Therefore, the role played by the return plans of the Spanish and the Ecuadorian governments should not be over-estimated.

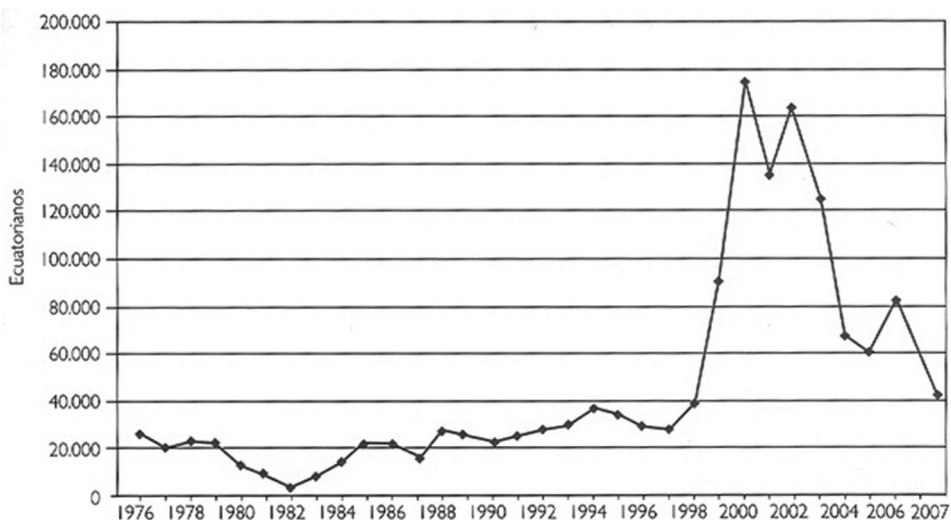
In the following section, we want to contextualise the current phenomenon of remigration to Ecuador by giving an overview of the development of Ecuadorian migrational flows.

4. The ‘Spanish Dream’: The Ecuadorian migration wave of the late 1990s

Like other Latin American countries, Ecuador has a long history of internal and international migration. A first period of international emigration took place starting in the 1930s (Herrera 2008: 15). From then up to the 1990s, the United States was the main destination. Most of the emigrants – mainly men – came from the country’s south. The ‘new Ecuadorian migration’ (Jokisch/Pribilsky 2002: 75) post-1998 differs significantly from this first period of international migration with respect to the regions of origin and destination as well as the gender and socio-economic background of the migrants. The most striking difference may be the fact that more people left the country within a shorter time, as the graph shows.

Today, depending on the source, it is assumed that over ten per cent of Ecuadorians reside abroad (*Comisión Especial Interinstitucional de Estadísticas de Migraciones en el Ecuador* 2008: 3).

TABLE 1
Migration balance 1976-2007



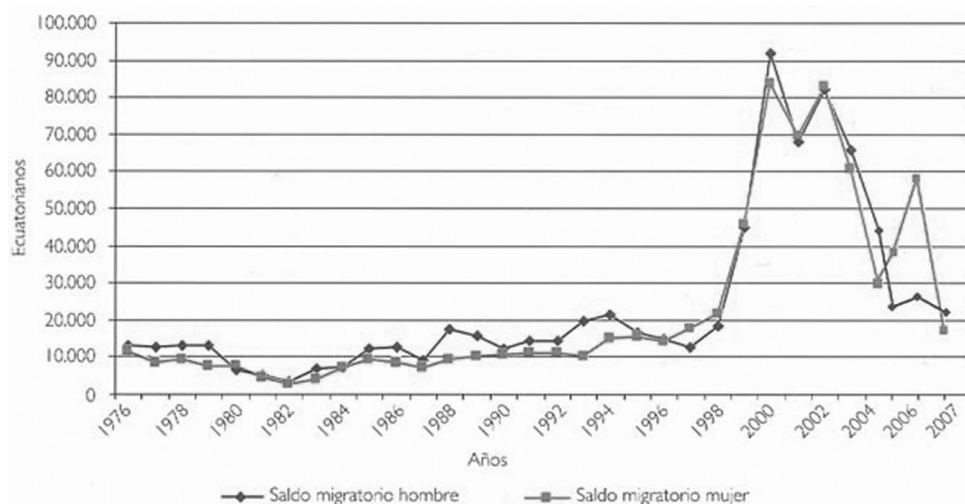
SOURCE: UNFPA and FLACSO 2008: 16. Data from Dirección Nacional de Migración.

During the Ecuadorian crisis, from 1998 to 2000, Europe increasingly became the focus of Ecuadorian migrants, with Spain and Italy as the most important destinations. The longstanding ‘American dream’ of migrants was replaced by the ‘Spanish dream’. While entering the USA became more difficult due to visa restrictions and tighter inspections, Spain, as the former colonial mother country with a shared language, offered jobs in a fast growing economy, especially in the construction and social-service sectors. Between 1996 and 2001, 47 per cent of Ecuadorian migrants went to Spain, 33 per cent to the United States and approximately nine per cent to Italy (Herrera 2008: 33).

Within a few years, Ecuadorians became the largest Latin American immigrant group in Spain and the largest migrant community after the Moroccans. According to the latest publications of the *Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración*, 415,328 Ecuadorians have a permanent residence permit in Spain. Taking into account the migrants without legal status, the number exceeds 700,000.⁷

With respect to the socio-economic situation of the migrants, 13 per cent were living in extreme poverty and 27 per cent in poverty when they decided to leave the country, according to the poverty classification of the United Nations. Women make up a much greater share of the second migrational wave than the first, so it is legitimate to speak of a ‘feminisation of migration’ in the Ecuadorian case as the following graphic shows:

TABLE 2
Migration balance by gender 1976-2007



SOURCE: UNFPA and FLACSO 2008: 16. Data from Dirección Nacional de Migración.

⁷ “Candidatos del MPD en España piden a Gobierno un nuevo plan de retorno” (18.03.2009). In: <<http://www.eldiario.com.ec/noticias-manabi-ecuador/112398-candidatos-en-espana-piden-nuevo-plan-de-retorno/>> (13.07.2010).

The gender ratio varies in the different regions. While in the southern highlands, a region with a long migration history, it is still predominantly men who migrate, it is women who predominate in the emigration from the urban centres Guayaquil and Quito (Herrera 2008: 19f).

5. Return plans as migration policies

“In the imaginary of the migrants, the idea of return is always present. The desire to return is very strong and influences the way migrants think about their integration into the destination’s society and how they live their daily migration experience. [...] But, in practice, the migration projects are not much about return” (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008).

This statement reveals that there is a persistent ‘myth of return’ among Ecuadorian emigrants in Spain. Our field research led us to the assumption that many talk about return, but there were relatively few who actually considered return as a viable option before the global crisis. That return is an important topic within the daily discourse of (female) migrants is confirmed by a survey on the virtual platform *Migrante Ecuatoriano* (www.migrante.ecuatoriano.gov.ec): 94 per cent of the 2,100 users who participated in the survey stated that they would like to return. Although Ecuadorian migrants seem to think continuously about their future return to their home country, they usually keep on postponing it. These patterns are a limited outline on the individual perspective – in the following section governmental measures and national frameworks are presented.

5.1. Bienvenid@s a casa – the Ecuadorian remigration plan

The political and economic situation in Ecuador has transformed dramatically over the last decade: the economy has stabilised to a certain extent after the crisis that ended in dollarization in the year 2000, but social disparities and poverty remain and in some regions have even grown (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2008 and 2010: 11; Acosta 2009: 2f). The presidency of left-wing president Rafael Correa can be considered a turning point with regard to national migration politics and policies. Many argue that he is the first president to take the migration phenomenon seriously: a range of new measures address the ‘migration problem’, such as the creation of the National Secretary for Migration (*Secretaría Nacional del Migrante SENAMI*), the right to vote for Ecuadorians who reside abroad, and the representation of migrants in the national parliament by 6 of 100 deputies. The main pillar of the new migration policies is the return plan (*Plan de Retorno Voluntario, Digno y Sostenible*), launched in January 2008. The plan is an attempt to actively encourage migrants to come back to their home country. It is intended to support Ecuadorians abroad in their decision-making process when considering a potential return and in their economic and social reintegration in Ecuador.

The plan is coordinated by different (non)governmental agencies, and consists of various measures, projects and funds such as the elimination of taxes on household effects and vehicles (*Facilidad para el traslado de menaje de casa y equipo de trabajo*),

funds for micro businesses (*Fondo para el retorno digno y sostenible ‘El Cucayo’*), housing subsidies (*Bono de vivienda para personas migrantes*), and counselling. The plan includes reintegration into the education and health systems and the foundation of a specialised bank (*Banco del migrante*) to invest migrants’ financial resources in a ‘productive’ way.

When the plan was launched in 2008, demand for it was rather low and both public and expert opinion was critical of the political project. However, since the beginning of the global economic crisis, the number of migrants applying for the programs contained in the plan has grown consistently. Susana López, coordinator for SENAMI, points out that while in 2008 only twenty people a day requested information; by January 2009 approximately 300 persons daily came to the SENAMI offices in Ecuador, Spain, the United States and Italy.

5.2. *Plan de Retorno Voluntario – the Spanish government plan*

In September 2008, the Spanish government also launched a return plan, the *Plan de Retorno Voluntario*. The Spanish return plan addresses itself to immigrants from twenty countries that have signed a bilateral treaty on social security. The majority of immigrants who have applied for the plan are from Morocco, Ecuador and Colombia. The plan offers the possibility for legal immigrants who have been integrated into the formal Spanish labour market to receive all their unemployment benefits in two stages when they voluntarily return to their home countries: they receive 40 per cent of their total unemployment benefits at the moment of departure and the remaining 60 per cent a month later. The Spanish Ministry of Employment reports that the migrants receive, on average, a total of approximately 9,600 Euros.⁸ Migrants must accept the following restrictions in order to have access to the plan:

- They are required to leave the country within 30 days after receiving the first part of their unemployment benefit;
- Any family members who do not possess an independent residence permit must also leave;
- They are not allowed to return to Spain as residents or to undertake economic or professional activities in Spain for three years.

Ecuadorian return migrants are able to participate in both plans. Up to now, fewer immigrants have applied to the plan than the government expected. Of the 100,000 eligible immigrants in June 2009, only 6,000 had left the country.⁹

⁸ “Plan de retorno voluntario en España no ha tenido el éxito esperado”. In: <http://listin.com.do/app/win_dows_various/print_news> (26.12.2008).

⁹ ILO (International Labour Organization): “Voluntary Return Programme for non-EU migrant workers in Spain”. In: <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/migpractice/migmain.showPractice?p_lang=en&p_practice_id=29> (06.08.2009). The number refers not just to Ecuadorian migrants but to all migrants in Spain. There is no information available on the exact number of Ecuadorian migrants. Various sources publish different numbers of migrants registered in the plan, so the number must be treated with caution.

5.3. *Return plans – just a political discourse? Comments and criticism surrounding the plans*

The return plans have provoked a wide range of reactions both in Ecuador and Spain. Where the Ecuadorian plan is concerned, two lines of argument dominate: while some consider the plan purely as political rhetoric, others see it as marking a fundamental and necessary change in the country's migration policies.

On the one hand, the return plan needs to be seen within the broader political programme of left-wing president Rafael Correa. It consists of a nationalist ideology under the slogan '*la patria ya es de todos*' and tries to recoup the confidence of the Ecuadorian people in their national political and economic institutions. The fact that every Ecuadorian citizen is considered part of this new political programme calls out for action to be taken on behalf of those Ecuadorians living abroad. However, with the deepening crisis, Correa backtracked some months after introducing the plan: "Although there are 50,000 unemployed Ecuadorians in Spain, if all of them come back, we won't be able to attend to all of them".¹⁰ Critics seem to conclude that Rafael Correa is politicising the migration issue within a populist nationalist discourse without taking into account the real migratory situation either in the countries of destination or in Ecuador.

On the other hand, the return plan is considered a necessary change in Ecuadorian migration politics. Gioconda Herrera, migration and gender expert at FLACSO, states: "Correa has positioned the migration issue in a more serious way than any previous president" (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008). These are important first steps in creating sustainable migration policies. Additionally, the simple fact that there is an institution dealing exclusively with migration questions gives migrants the feeling of being taken seriously. At the very least the symbolic significance of the measures must be acknowledged.

The main criticism of the Spanish return plan centres on its strict requirements, such as the prohibition on entering Spain for three years. The risk of immigrants losing the possibility of returning to Spain to earn their living is too high, especially because of the unstable political, social and economic situation in the sending countries. The fact that migrants who return on the Spanish plan will be given a higher priority when they apply again for jobs in Spain after five years does not compensate them for the loss of work and residence permits in Spain.

Another criticism is the way in which the Spanish government conceptualises immigrants. As Alvaro Zuleta, president of the Colombian immigrant group Aculco puts it: "We are not just talking about workers but about human beings".¹¹ Immigrants do not want to be considered objects that can be 'hired and fired' arbitrarily as soon as they are economically expendable. This conceptualisation does not take into account the fact that migrants are not simply workers, but have also established social relations and long-term perspectives in their new home.

¹⁰ "Entrevista: Rafael Correa, Presidente de Ecuador: '¿Cuál es el problema de un eje entre Venezuela, Bolivia y Ecuador?'". In: <http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/problema/eje/Venezuela/Bolivia/Ecuador/elpepuint/20090428elpepuint_5/Tes> (28.04.2009).

¹¹ "Candidatos del MPD en España piden a Gobierno un nuevo plan de retorno" (18.03.2009). In: <<http://www.eldiario.com.ec/noticias-manabi-ecuador/112398-candidatos-en-espana-piden-nuevo-plan-de-retorno/>> (13.07.2010).

At the same time, the Spanish government is financing development projects in those regions in Ecuador which are most affected by migration (AECIECUADOR 2009). Within the ‘migration and development’ logic, these projects aim both at re-integrating the migrants back home and at turning their migration experience into a development input. Although these attempts can be evaluated positively in the sense of an integrated migration policy, many argue that under the guise of the ‘migration and development’ strategy, Spanish migration policies are becoming increasingly restrictive.

6. The decision-making process of return migrants

This section seeks to analyse in detail Ecuadorian immigrants’ reasons for returning or not returning to their home country. In doing this, we want to highlight gender-specific decision-making processes for both migration and remigration. The data is based upon semi-structured interviews conducted in Quito with women who had returned to Ecuador from Spain.

Most of the interviewed female migrants draw an ambivalent picture of their migration experience: “Sometimes it was a good experience, sometimes it was a bad experience” (Elsa, return migrant) – “I tell you, I suffered a lot, but I liked it” (Pilar, return migrant). It is striking that women describe their migration, in retrospect, as neither a success nor a failure. They do not want to be forced into this dichotomy. Reality seems to lie beyond an ‘only positive’ or an ‘only negative’ experience. Their ambivalent evaluation of their stay already suggests that any decision on a possible return involves a complex process in which a wide range of advantages and disadvantages have to be considered.

Analysing the biographies of return migrants, it becomes clear that, in most cases, the return was considered, desired and planned long before it occurred. Nevertheless, there is a difficult decision-making process between the planning and the actual act of return, and often a special or unexpected event accelerates the decision. The analysis of the interviews has revealed that economic, emotional and cultural reasons simultaneously influence the decision-making process.

6.1. *‘I had a lot of debts to pay off’ – Economic factors in the decision-making process*

Lack of money and debt prevent migrants from returning during an initial stage, the duration of which varies. In most cases, migrants incur debts when they pay for their initial migration trip and in some cases migrants even undertake the trip to escape previous debt. Our interviews indicate that all of the women left their country intending to return after a defined period of time. Most of them were forced to prolong their stay because it took them longer to pay off their debt than expected. Even when they are finally able to pay off their debts, it can still seem impossible for migrants to return:

When I had finally paid back everything, I asked myself ‘How can I return like this, empty-handed and without money? Did I only come to pay back the money and nothing else?’ Then I decided to stay. I said ‘I’ll stay one or two more years and then I’ll go back’ (Pilar, return migrant).

Depending on the job situation and specific living conditions of Ecuadorian women, their financial means are often limited. Sometimes they hardly manage to keep themselves with their own wage. They often live in very modest conditions and send as much money to their families as they can. But without savings of their own, it is impossible to return given the cost of the flight, let alone the cost of laying the foundation for a new life in Ecuador. Katerine Renjifo, coordinator of the return programme of the International Organisation for Migration in Quito (IOM Ecuador), confirms:

A lot of these people may be fed up with the situation and they decide to return, but they cannot, because they are in debt from the journey. First, as we know, they have to pay for the journey and then they have to bring back home at least some savings. I have had cases where people came back after seven years and didn't have anything. They didn't have savings, they didn't have a place to live, and they didn't have anything (Interview Renjifo, IOM 2008).

In their study of female migration in Ecuador, Camacho and Hernández Basante (2005) found that women mostly make the decision to migrate together with their husbands and families while men take the decision by themselves. As the expectations of the other family members back home are unrealistic and often cannot be met, female migrants suffer from permanent pressure. The pressure becomes worse when relatives have supported the migration project financially and are therefore especially interested in a 'successful' outcome of the venture. It is disappointing for them when women come back with few savings or nothing at all. They then feel that there was insufficient justification for the long period of separation. The lack of financial capital and increased debt combined with the fear of failing in the migration project leads to a permanent extension of the undertaking.

6.2. *'The main reason is the family' – The role of transnational motherhood and other emotional reasons*

In most cases, emotional rather than financial or economic reasons trigger the final decision to return. The migrant's role as a mother and their specific role within the wider family structure can be considered one of the most important influences on the decision-making process. Migrant women often miss the security and the protection their families provide for them, and mothers long for their children. The probability that women return to their home country is significantly higher when they have left their children behind. In contrast, it seems likely that Ecuadorians who have brought their families with them to Spain, who feel at home there and who are fully integrated, will not return easily. Whether or not migrant women try to bring their children to Spain, thus implicitly deciding to stay longer and become more deeply involved with Spanish society, is a question of personal attitude: "I didn't plan to stay. [...] I left [Ecuador] due to a forced situation and I came back. That's why I didn't take my daughter to Spain, because I thought 'Why, when I'm not going to stay?' And if I had brought her, I would have had to stay there" (Estefania, return migrant). Offering a better future to their children is one of the main motives for emigration – especially for women. Therefore, migration often becomes an inter-generational project with 'a long time horizon – people make *intergenerational* sacrifices' (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008).

Research confirms that the idea of return is always in the mind of migrants. But at what point do female migrants decide to return? Katherine Renjifo explains that ‘in some cases the catalyst is that something very tragic happens in the family’ (Interview Renjifo 2008, IOM). Often the interviewees returned in response to an urgent appeal from the family or one of the family members. Some women are still convinced – even in retrospect – that they would have lost their children if they had not returned just in time. Herrera also confirms:

I think that the return isn’t included in the logic of the life cycle of migrants, except that there is some kind of fracture or problem, something that marks your individual project, like when a relative dies, and you ask yourself ‘What am I doing here?’ (Interview Herrera, FLACSO 2008).

6.3. *‘To have more liberty’ – Gender role models as a cultural factor*

Upon their arrival, Ecuadorian migrant women are confronted with European gender role models. This confrontation with different modes of gender relations normally leads either to a (re)negotiation process or an affirmation of their own concepts of gender-relations.

The ‘moral decline’ of Ecuadorian female migrants within Spanish society is a subject talked about by nearly all interviewed women. They disapprove of the behaviour of other Ecuadorian women in Spain and clearly distance themselves. Several interviewed female returnees clearly disapprove of the attempts of some Ecuadorian women to actively look for a new partner in Spain. “I didn’t come here to find a husband. I came to work” (Raquel, return migrant). By emphasising that the only reason for their migration is to work in order to support their families back home, they want to show their strong loyalty to their family.

The phenomenon of machismo and the prevailing attitude in Ecuadorian patriarchal society that sexual purity is threatened by an overly liberal environment is supported not just by jealous husbands; women themselves have also assimilated the idea. Some of the women who returned express disgust over their compatriots who have obviously enjoyed the (sexual) ‘liberty’ of a European society.

But what I didn’t like, for example, is that you have more liberty there. You can do what you want, it is as if... as if I went there and if I had wanted to be a ‘street woman’ I would have been one. Just like that, because no one saw what I was doing. Everything was up to your personality, everything you were. (Joana, return migrant).

The interviewees explained the moral decline of their female compatriots mainly by a lack of social control. The above quote shows how Joana felt when confronted with her ‘new life’, the newly gained liberty and overall absence of social control and the absence of men, who are traditionally ‘responsible’ for the protection of women.

However, according to López (2004), it seems that many migrant women do appreciate their new liberty and find a new lifestyle that works for them. Moreno shares this opinion: “Although women do reproduce *macho*-like socio-cultural practices, those women who succeed in overcoming these intra-familial practices often find a new sense

of ‘being a woman’ (Interview Moreno, SJRM 2008). Comparing those who do not want to return because of their fear of losing their new (gender-specific) liberty with the interviewed return migrants, it is striking that they often did not adopt the moral values of the receiving countries. Joana reports that her sister “will not come back anymore, because she adopted this new way of living, incorporated this new ‘ideology’ of liberty, but I didn’t and that’s why I went back home” (Joana, return migrant).

It cannot be concluded that the migrant’s attitude towards the moral system of the receiving country always correlates with the decision to return, but it seems possible that women who do not encounter problems adapting to the value system and the gender role model of the receiving country tend to postpone or even to avoid returning.

The fact that the women remigrants interviewed did not talk explicitly about integration problems specific to their gender role may be interpreted in different ways. First of all, it is not common for migrant women to reflect on either their own gender role or on gendered relations in Ecuador. As a consequence, they speak about gender only implicitly, when they talk about the loss of their financial autonomy or the arguments they have with their family members after their return. Second, it seems more likely that women who did not adapt to apparently more liberal ‘European’ values and gender roles return to their home country than women who did adapt to the norms of the receiving country. Third, most of the women seemed to know what they had to expect on their return with regard to Ecuadorian gender role models. Therefore they easily (re)integrated into the dominant (traditional), gender-norm system on their return. At the same time, it can be argued that control through social networks and the desire to integrate with the community at home after remigrants’ experience of exclusion during the migration period explains behaviour conforming to gender roles.

7. Back home – Remigration realities of Ecuadorian women

“Because of the mismatch between the imagined and experienced homecoming, coming home can be more difficult and emotionally destabilizing than leaving home and settling in the new part of the world” (Stefansson 2004: 8).

Our analysis of the remigration experience reveals the economic, emotional and cultural difficulties with which remigrants are confronted upon their return. The study of the problems and opportunities remigrants encounter once they are back home in turn serves to identify and question the potential of governmental supportive measures and ‘migration and development’ strategies.

‘Returning home’ sounds trouble-free, but it is not as unproblematic as is assumed. Katerine Renjifo reports: “It was a shock for them to integrate into [Spanish] society and it is a shock for them to re-integrate into Ecuadorian society” (Interview Renjifo, IOM 2008). Renjifo argues that returnees are confronted with three ‘shocks’ once they come home: economic, cultural, and emotional. Psychoanalytic migration researchers describe emigration as well as remigration as a *trauma* which has permanent and profound effects on individuals (Zeul 1995). Emigration as well as remigration can be seen as decisive events, as turning-points, in the biographies of Ecuadorian migrant women, and both

leave their marks. The effects are noticeable over a long period of time. As migration is a potentially traumatic experience, return migration can lead to a ‘double trauma’. To what extent women can cope with it and use their experience in a positive way in their life back home depends not only on their personality but also on the support and encouragement of their social surroundings and society.

7.1. *The economic shock: Learning to live again with less*

Respondents most frequently referred to the ‘economic shock’ and this seems to be the most well-known and ‘acknowledged’ problem of returnees.¹² This shock results mainly from the comparison between the economic situations of each country. Whereas before their emigration they accepted their financial situation without any ‘real’ possibility of comparison, now they constantly compare their situation in Spain with their ‘new’ lives in Ecuador, as the following quote shows: “When I lived there, I had everything, now I have nothing” (Raquel, return migrant).

On their return, women become aware of the gap between salaries and living conditions in Ecuador and Spain. It is possible to earn up to 1,400 dollars a month cleaning houses in Spain; as an *empleada* with a legal contract in one of the upper-class houses in Quito, the maximum a woman earns for the same kind of work is 160 dollars.

Many of the migrant women become used to their financial autonomy while living in Spain, so that for some it is very difficult to lose part of it when they come back home and have to get used to the “the old circumstances” (Pilar, return migrant). Returning home therefore requires a re-negotiation of power relations between women and men (not just with their husband but also with other family members) around financial issues. The situation is aggravated by the fact that the monthly family income is so drastically reduced that it is often not enough to satisfy their basic needs.

In Ecuador, one of the most widespread stereotypes of migration is that emigration automatically leads to wealth and prosperity. In the interviews, the returnees distance themselves from this discourse: they are proud of what they have achieved, but they talk about their accomplishments in a modest way, about the little things one needs to live decently, which they obtained only through hard work. Savings accumulated abroad are often spent on basic commodities and household goods immediately after the migrant’s arrival back home,. Investments in small businesses often do not yield a profit.

I wanted to set up a small business, but when I came back I found most of the things I had in my house destroyed. So all the money I had to start my business ... I had to buy mattresses because they were all destroyed, the kitchen, the fridge, I had to buy everything and all the money went on this (Catalina, return migrant).

¹² We want to suggest that economic lines of argument legitimate emigration within Ecuadorian society. The problem that emerges from reduced salaries upon return is a logical consequence of this pattern of thought. Therefore this argumentation seems especially comprehensible within the narratives of the interviewed women.

In general, most of the migrant women managed to improve the living conditions of their families in Ecuador¹³ – even if in many cases just slightly.

7.2. The emotional shock: Disappointments at the moment of return and family reunification

‘Coming home’ is closely linked for most of the returnees to reunification with their family. Nevertheless, at the same time it also means saying goodbye to friends and sometimes to family members who are left behind in Spain. New emotional ties have been created with compatriots, Spanish friends and employers.

Although they return to their families and old friends, the down side of their return becomes apparent within a short time: in many cases, the reunification with their children and family in Ecuador – for which they have waited so long – is problematic and full of disappointment. Children hardly know their mother and do not accept her as an authority; ignoring her, they ask aunts or a grandmother for help. Family life is not as harmonious as returnees have imagined or remembered from a distance. Family relations must be re-negotiated and re-defined in a mostly painful process.¹⁴ At the same time, women feel pangs of remorse. Women question their original decision to emigrate; some of them even regret having migrated: “The moment my children needed me most, I wasn’t there” (Pilar, return migrant).

One of the implicit or explicit reproaches heard by female migrants in Ecuadorian society is that of them being ‘uncaring mothers’. This accusation is unfair in the eyes of the remigrants, because their suffering in Spain goes unrecognised. Migrant women want others to acknowledge what they achieved and sacrificed while being abroad (cf. Zeul 1995).

Nobody, nobody is conscious of how we worked there. [...] They think it is easy, but they don’t have an idea what it’s like. When my daughter makes me angry, I say, you have no idea how I worked there, so that you have a place to live where nobody makes trouble. [...] Our children do not recognise what we did to ourselves, the sacrifices we made [in Spain] for them (Pilar, return migrant).

Their feelings of guilt and the missing recognition of their ‘sacrifices’ make the emotional part of the return experience especially traumatic, leading to hurt feelings, self-reproach and doubt.

7.3. The cultural shock: Feeling like strangers back home

Cultural trauma stems from a transformation and idealisation of the home country while the migrant is abroad. New developments and cultural change in the home country

¹³ It does not take much to assume that this is no coincidence. The migrant women, if possible, came back exactly at the moment they had ‘moved their family forward’. Migrants who have been abroad for a long time but cannot show savings, in contrast, do not decide to return.

¹⁴ For a panorama of the problems confronting transnational families, see, for example, Serrano Flores (2007).

often lead to disappointment at the moment when returning migrants re-discover their home country, especially when they have been away for a long time. The migration experience seems to repeat itself – re-migration is like a new migration.

Migrants often realise just how much they have been influenced by new social systems and cultural norms, in terms of gender roles, work ethic, urban living, and independence at the moment when they are confronted with their homeland and with those who remained there – the ‘stayees’. The newly acquired skills and outlook on life adopted abroad can make home appear “narrow and old-fashioned” (Long/Oxford 2004: 10), characterised by lack of development, inefficiency, and an authoritarian mentality (Gmelch/Gmelch 1995). The migrant women return to ‘their’ country, but they often feel like strangers. It is a painful process to realise that their expectations do not meet reality (Zeul 1995). Homecomings show that creating a ‘new’ home at home is a complicated task, involving suffering and a nostalgia for diaspora that may last for years (Stefansson 2004).

In their attempt to re-integrate into the ‘foreign’ place they call home, women struggle with the re-definition of their gendered identity and gender role. Even though most of our interview partners did not specifically raise gender issues, difficulties surrounding the (re)definition and (re)negotiation of gender roles can be identified in their narrations. Camacho and Hernández Basante (2005) point out that in the Ecuadorian case, a re-negotiation of gendered activities does not take place in the households from which women have emigrated. ‘Women’s work’ is replaced by ‘women’s work’, which means that the responsibility of work traditionally designated to women, work such as child care, elderly care, cleaning and cooking, passes from the migrant woman to other female relatives. Husbands or other male family members generally do not engage in this kind of work when women leave. At the same time, women who emigrate do traditional ‘women’s work’ in Spain as well.

It can be concluded that in most cases migration does not lead to a transformation of traditional forms of gender-specific labour division – either in the home or in the receiving country. Most of the studies cited above also confirm that female migration does not necessarily cause a transformation of traditional gender role models.

7.4. *Applying acquired knowledge and skills: Female return migrants as development agents*

An important research question within the field of migration and development concerns the development potential of return migrants. There are expectations that migrants will send *remesas* – remittances – during their stay abroad, and bring home their savings and invest them in productive small businesses after their return. Some authors and politicians assume that the knowledge, know-how, experience and specific work skills acquired abroad will contribute to the development of the home country. The Ecuadorian return plan is also based on this assumption.

However, what do returnees themselves think about their stay abroad? In their own perception, what kind of knowledge or skills have they acquired? And how do they apply these new assets in Ecuador?

Returnees appreciate the enrichment that they experienced by immersing themselves in the culture of Southern Europe and by broadening their horizon while living in another ‘reality’:

Then you come back, with a more conciliatory and broader mentality, you can put yourself in the position of many others (Valentina, return migrant).

The interviewed women evaluate their experiences in terms of a ‘change in mentality’, which they link with experience and knowledge:

It is a chance for migrants to change their mentality, to acquire experience, know-how. And I hope they come back and invest here, in their country (Valentina, return migrant).

Katerine Renjifo states that remigrant women who took part in the IOM Ecuador return programme have a very active and enterprising attitude. They want to achieve something; they want to build up their own small business. The interviewed women themselves often reported that they had learned to work faster and more effectively in Europe (or the US). The women see this ‘hacer más rápido’ – comparing themselves with those who remained in Ecuador – as something positive, something they have learned. They were impressed that some things in Europe work differently, often faster and more efficiently. But they also learned about the flip side of this effectiveness: stress, burnout, and little time for social and family activities.

The women are proud of having coped with difficult situations in unknown cities and countries, in the “big, wide world” (Catalina, return migrant). Their personal development benefited from the time abroad and their experiences there.

Furthermore, the interviewees highlight different abilities that they acquired during their stay abroad and which enriched their individual life, but which do not necessarily lead to economic development. They learned, for example, how to embroider and cook Spanish meals.

Additionally, they bring back home some kind of professional know-how or business ideas; however, many times these cannot be applied in the Ecuadorian context: ‘There are people who acquired know-how in a special area of work and they try to use this here, when they come back’, Katerine Renjifo explains. She tells of the experience of a young Ecuadorian who wanted to start a gardening business in Ecuador: “Because she knew that it was a very good business in Spain. And she came here and tried to do the same, but it went very bad and in the end the business idea failed” (Interview Renjifo, IOM 2008). This failure was due to different climatic conditions and different market mechanisms. It becomes clear that the transfer of knowledge, know-how, competences and capacities from one country to another is often problematic. While the know-how of highly-skilled migrants could certainly be assumed to have a development impact back home, the majority of migrants who work in the construction or care sectors do not return with ‘new’ knowledge or skills. Since the return plans are not addressed to highly-skilled migrants and therefore are not attractive to them, the migration and development strategy incorporated in the plan should be critically interrogated.

8. Conclusion

Our empirical research indicates that returning home can be even more difficult and emotionally destabilizing than leaving home and settling in the ‘new’ world. Further, by

reconstructing the experiences of female returnees, we have aimed to highlight that the (re)migration processes are gender-specific. In our exploratory study we have not taken into account the experiences of male returnees. However, as our empirical findings suggest, women do experience (re)migration differently than men: first, the gender-specific labour market both in the receiving country and back home results in gendered experiences of both migration and remigration. Second, taking into account that reproduction is still mainly assigned to women and that many women conceive of motherhood as their primary identity, women often have stronger emotional bonds with those left behind than male migrants. Third, due to persistent culturally and socially gendered role models, gendered power relations determine both migration and remigration processes.

As far as the ‘migration and development’ debate is concerned, we want to point out that while the measures in the return plan support migrants in their reintegration process, such measures do not necessarily lead to local development. Although such plans aim to contribute to the development of the sending country, the effects are limited.

In the Ecuadorian return plan, the tax-free importation of household goods and workshop tools facilitates the establishment of micro-businesses. The *Fondo Cucayo* aims to support micro-businesses, thus converting the migration experience into a benefit for the home country. The Spanish plan only includes this aspect by citing the possibility of receiving support from the Spanish Development Cooperation and by transferring unemployment benefits to the remigrants.

As our empirical study has shown, the experiences and skills acquired abroad cannot always be applied to a different economic and cultural context. Women in particular do not bring home great fortunes or professional knowledge. Our findings call for a critical interrogation of the expectations expressed by national governments and development organisations. Migrants cannot and should not be expected to compensate for the failure of states to achieve economic growth and provide social services. Further, it does not seem right to criticize migrants for spending their private savings on consumption rather than investing in local development projects. Instead of conceptualising migrants as development agents, the state’s task should consist of improving the framework to ensure the social security, well-being and freedom of its citizens. Both sending and receiving countries, as well as the international community, should assume responsibility in the important task of developing a suitable framework for a globalized future.

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